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ABSTRACT

The role of the black reading specialist is here defined on the basis of informal observations and on surveys distributed to reading specialists in predominantly black colleges and to deans of predominantly black graduate programs. Though the role of the black reading specialist includes all the tasks of the typical reading specialist, the black reading specialist has the following additional major responsibilities: (1) becoming more involved in the activities and functions of the major reading organizations, (2) contributing to research efforts to discover better ways of teaching disadvantaged children to read, (3) recruiting and training black potential reading specialists, (4) working with community groups and agencies, and (5) serving as consultants to local school districts and institutions of higher learning. The black reading specialist should attempt to work within existing organizations (reading, college, community) to strengthen the black role in these organizations. Special interest groups within organizations such as the International Reading Association could, it is suggested, help pool resources of black reading specialists. Black college students, particularly males, should be encouraged to go into the field of reading. (References are included.) (AL)

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ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITY OF THE BLACK READING SPECIALIST

Critical Issues in Reading Instruction Among Black Teachers and Students

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What should be the role and function of the black reading specialist? To answer this question it might be helpful to consider the role and function of the typical reading specialist. According to Dietrich (3), a group of reading specialists who attended a work conference in St. Louis to define the types of people who could be classed as reading specialists decided upon five categories of reading specialists: (1) Reading Teacher, (2) Reading Consultant, (3) Reading Coordinator, (4) Reading Clinician, and (5) College Instructor.

"The role of each was defined at the conference as follows:"

Reading Teacher. A Reading Teacher is one who devotes full time to remedial and corrective work at the elementary level or to remedial, corrective, and developmental reading at the junior and senior high school levels.

Reading Consultant. A Reading Consultant is a full-time employee who works directly with teachers and administrators within a school to develop and implement a total program of reading.

Reading Coordinator. The Reading Coordinator has two main roles: (1) to provide leadership in all phases of the system-wide reading program and (2) to interpret the program to administrators and to make recommendations.

Reading Clinician. The Clinician generally aids teachers in diagnosing remedial cases and in planning and carrying out remedial work for persistently difficult reading disability cases. Additionally, clinicians take an active part in the practicum phase of pre-service or in-service training of other reading personnel.

College Instructor. College Instructors (1) teach reading improvement to college students; (2) teach courses concerned with reading methodology to pre-service teachers (foundational courses); (3) teach reading courses on the graduate level; and (4) advise, direct, and engage in research activities in their fields of interest (3).

It certainly seems valid to assume that black reading specialists are functioning in these various roles. However, the above information leads naturally to the question as to whether the role and function of the black reading specialist should differ from that of the typical reading specialist? On the surface, it appears that it would be rather fallacious to ascribe a role to the black reading specialist that would be different from the role played by reading specialists in general. However, on closer inspection, a case can be made to support the position that the role and function of the black reading specialist should differ in some respects from the role and function of reading specialists in general. There are many who would say that such a position is untenable. However, one only has to look at the national scene to find support for this point of view. The Black Caucus, an organization of black U.S. congressmen, has been very active during the past year. They have announced that they will hold a conference later this year to discuss civil rights legislation and to suggest candidates for the presidential election to be hald in November 1972. America's

black doctors have also sought a greater role in attempts by the federal government to develop a cure for sickle cell anemia, an inherited blood disorder that occurs almost exclusively among blacks. Policy-making delegates of the National Medical Association adopted a resolution calling for:

(1) A research program administered directly from the White House.
(2) Appointment by President Nixon of a black pediatrician to the National Advisory Committee on Sickle Cell Anemia, and
(3) Designation of the Pediatric Section of the NMA as a coordinator of research being performed by various investigators (8).

Should the black reading specialist be any less concerned with the needs and interests of blacks than that which has been exhibited by black congressmen and doctors? Reasoning by analogy, it would seem that the above information gives currency to the idea that the black reading specialist may have a special role to play in addition to the conventional roles which have been described by Dietrich. What follows, then, is a discussion of the black reading specialist's role and responsibilities as they are perceived by the writer.

WORKING WITHIN THE STRUCTURE OF THE MAJOR READING ASSOCIATIONS

One of the foremost responsibilities of the black reading specialist is to work within the structure of the major reading associations to help make them more viable organizations and, at the same time, to harness their resources to assist us in solving the problems which we face professionally. It is most important tnat the black reading specialist become more visible, in a meaningful way, in the major reading organizations. One might ask at this point, what is the status of blacks within the major reading organizations? Before attempting to

answer this question, the writer prepared a questionnaire which was sent to reading specialists who teach in the 104 predominantly black colleges. This source was utilized because it offered a readily identifiable group of black reading specialists who should be playing an active role within the structure of these organizations. This questionnaire attempted to determine their role and to get their opinions on certain issues. The over-all response to this questionnaire was encouraging; out of 104 colleges polled, sixty-five (i.e., sixty-three percent) responded.

In addition, a letter was sent to the executive secretaries of the International Reading Association, the College Reading Association, and the National Reading Conference inquiring about the status of blacks within these organizations. As of the writing of this paper, Ralph Staiger, Executive Secretary-Treasurer of the IRA, is the only one who replied to this inquiry.

As a result of this questionnaire, it was found that 73 percent of the respondents held membership in the IRA; 34 percent held membership in the NRC; and 21 percent held membership in the CRA. Twenty-two percent of the respondents did not hold membership in either of the three organizations. Ninety-nine usable questionnaires were received from the 65 colleges which responded, however, some of the respondents held membership in more than one organization.

Only four of the respondents indicated that they served on the Board of Directors or on one or more of the committees sponsored by these organizations. Fifty-one percent of the respondents felt that black reading specialists were poorly represented within the structure

of these orgainzations; 6 percent felt that blacks were adequately represented; 1 percent felt that blacks were well represented; and 42 percent indicated that they had no idea whether black reading specialists were adequately represented within the organizational structure of the IRA, CRA, and NRC.

An attempt was also made to determine the level of the black reading specialists' involvement within the structure of the three major reading associations by determining the extent to which they attended and actively participated in the annual conferences sponsored by these organizations. An analysis of the returned questionnaires indicated that during the last five years the typical reading specialist in this sample attended two conferences sponsored by one of the three organizations. Thirty-five percent of the sample indicated that they had not attended a single conference during the last five years, and 15 percent indicated that they had only attended one conference during the same time period. Only 22 percent of the sample indicated attendance at five conferences during the past five years.

Twenty-two percent of the sample also indicated that they had played an active role in one or more of the conference programs during the last five years. As a matter of interest, it was found that the persons who indicated that they had participated in the conference programs were also the ones with the highest rate of attendance.

An analysis of these data seem to indicate that the college reading specialists are really not a part of the mainstream of the major pro-

fessional reading associations. However, the writer wishes to make it clear that he in no way wishes to place the blame for this situation on either group--the reading specialists or the reading associations. He merely wishes to indicate the need for a greater participation in the activities of these organizations by black reading specialists.

On the other hand, Staiger* feels that "the IRA, throughout its history, has been well represented by all groups. He points out the fact that one black member is serving on the Board of Directors, "and another, who has just left the Board of Directors (after having served a three-year term), is expected to be placed in nomination for the presidency of IRA next spring." He states further that thirty-six blacks appeared on the convention program which was held in Atlantic City in 1971.

It is of interest to note that 47 percent of the respondents who participated in the survey mentioned above indicated that they would not like to see a special organization formed to meet the needs of the black reading specialist; 39 percent of the respondents were in favor of an organization of this type; and 14 percent were undecided.

It is the writer's opinion that the black reading specialist should attempt to make his needs felt through the existing organizations. It might be to our advantage to form a special interest group within the structure of the existing organizations to explore ways of becoming more of a part of the mainstream of the three major reading associations.

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*Staiger, Ralph C. Personal communication received from Executive Secretary - Treasurer of International Reading Association, September 28, 1971.

This special interest group might also serve as a clearinghouse for the dissemination of information relative to the special needs and interests of the black reading specialist. Another function of this group might be to establish a pool of reading specialists who would be available to serve as consultants to school districts in which there is a large percentage of disadvantaged students.

CONTRIBUTING TO RESEARCH EFFORTS TO DISCOVER BETTER WAYS OF TEACHING DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN TO READ

Black reading specialists should also be playing a major role in meeting one of the major challenges which is facing contemporary educators in large urban centers around the country - the reversal of the failure of urban schools to teach educationally or culturally disadvantaged children to read. A large percentage of these children are black. We might attempt to meet this challenge by helping to identify the major causal factors which seem to be impairing these children's ability to learn to read within the present system, and by developing reading materials and programs which will be more effective in teaching disadvantaged children to read. We should also be reporting any successes which we may be experiencing in our work with the disadvantaged.

Why is it important for the black reading specialist to make his contribution to this important endeavor? What can he do that has not already been done? The author feels that the black reading specialist may have developed special insights into the problems shared by significant numbers of disadvantaged students. Because of his cultural vantage point, he may have developed a perspective toward

this problem that is different in some respects from that of the typical reading specialist. To illustrate this point further, it is often assumed by the typical research worker in the field of reading that disadvantaged children have difficulty learning to read because of difficulties with "standard" English, attention span, auditory discrimination, etc. (1,2,5). However, Edwards, in an article which appeared in the Journal of Reading, suggests that many researchers may be looking at the learning problems of disadvantaged children with "too little regard to the broader and somewhat more complex sociological matrix that spawns these problems (4)." He categorizes these problems, identified above, as "secondary causative factors."

He raises the fundamental question as to "whether these are basic problems or merely symptomatic manifestations of something even more basic that really demands our attention (4)." He concludes by stating that the secondary causative problems of the disadvantaged "relate directly to the fact of his isolation and, hence, his imprisonment within his own very special cultural cocoon. Intelligent and economical use of our vast manpower, technological, and social engineering resources would dictate, therefore, that we combine our present concern about essentially pedagogical problems with effective changes within the attitudinal and sociological fabric of our country (4, pp. 12-13)."

One could say that this illustration lends support to the idea of considering the reading problems of the disadvantaged from a black perspective. In other words, it is important that the input of

the black reading specialist be added to that of other research workers in this field. Black reading specialists can accomplish this objective if they are given opportunities to publish and to present papers at the conventions which are held annually by the various reading associations. A position has already been taken concerning the level of the black reading specialist's involvement in the annual conferences sponsored by the three major reading associations. As far as publications are concerned, the respondents in the writer's sample, mentioned above, have contributed a total of 52 articles in professional journals during the last five years.

RECRUITING AND TRAINING POTENTIAL BLACK READING SPECIALISTS

A third responsibility of the black reading specialist has to do with recruiting and training potential black reading specialists. There is an urgent need to encourage more black males to enter the field of reading. For example, it was found in the writer's survey that 86 percent of the reading specialists who teach in predominantly black colleges are women. Informal observations of the reading teachers in the Philadelphia Public School System lead the author to the same general conclusion. Therefore, the black reading specialist should make every effort to encourage promising black persons (especially males) with whom he comes into contact to enter the field of reading.

It also seems reasonable to assume that one of the special roles of the black reading specialist should be that of training other potential black reading specialists and teachers for work in the field of reading in general, and, more specifically, for work with disadvantaged students. The author was associated with a predominantly black institution of higher learning which instituted a program of

this nature more than ten years ago. The very nature of this program made it possible for the participants to receive a specialized type of training and experience which would enable them to cope with the special problems they would possibly encounter in public schools and colleges as future reading specialists. Some of the graduates of this program are now directing reading programs in predominantly black colleges and are making worthwhile contributions to the institutions which they are serving.

Predominantly black colleges should give increased attention to the role they have been playing in the development of programs for the preparation of reading specialists. In a survey conducted by the writer, it was found that eight of these colleges offer graduate programs in reading which lead to the preparation of reading specialists. Using the appendix of From Isolation to Mainstream (7) as a source to identify the predominantly black colleges which have graduate programs, the author designed a brief questionnaire which he sent to the Deans of these schools. Twenty-one of the twenty-three schools contacted responded to this survey.

The following colleges indicated that they offered a graduate program with specialization in reading: Atlanta University, Bowie State College, Howard University, Jackson State College, Morgan State College, North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, South Carolina State College, and Texas Southern University. The program at Morgan State College is offered in conjunction with Towson State College, a predominantly white institution.

These findings seem to indicate a need for the expansion of graduate programs in reading in predominantly black colleges. Therefore, black reading specialists who are associated with predominantly black colleges with graduate schools should use their influence and expertise to encourage these schools to establish graduate programs in reading. It is also suggested that the eight colleges with degree programs in reading consider the possibility of co-operating with each other for the purpose of fostering existing programs; helping other predominantly black colleges to develop graduate programs in reading; and sponsoring conferences in reading with the idea of disseminating information concerning research activities on the academically disadvantaged, promising techniques for training teachers to work with disadvantaged students, and other relevant information. The expansion and strengthening of existing graduate programs in reading in predominantly black colleges will make it possible to increase significantly the number of black reading specialists who would be sensitive to the educational needs of disadvantaged children, and who could provide leadership to the many urban and rural school districts which desperately need their services.

Along the same line, there is a great deal of merit in some sort of a consortia arrangement between predominantly black graduate schools and predominantly white graduate schools for the purpose of developing graduate programs in reading for the preparation of reading specialists. An arrangement of this type would offer advantages to each institution such as the joint use of staff and facilities.

The Cooperative Master's Degree Program for Reading Specialists sponsored jointly by the graduate schools of Morgan State College and Towson State College could serve as a model for other institutions who wished to enter into a co-operative venture of this type.

WORKING WITH COMMUNITY GROUPS AND AGENCIES

Black reading specialists have the responsibility for service to their communities. There are many opportunities for involvement in the community such as providing reading services for adult members of the community who need help of this kind, and working with various community groups and agencies who are providing educational services for the black community.

In Pennsylvania, there are 600,000 adults--half of them from Philadelphia--who cannot read above the fourth grade level (9). This problem is not confined to Pennsylvania alone; during the past year, there was a 200,000 growth of functional illiterates in the United States. Functional illiterates are unable to read the newspaper, fill out job applications, take the written examination for a drivers license, and split ballots when and if they vote. Black reading specialists have a special opportunity to serve adult members of the black community who could be classified as functional illiterates.

An analysis of the data contained in the questionnaires which were sent to the reading specialists who teach in predominantly black colleges points up the fact that only thirty-three percent of the respondents indicated that they provided reading services for adult members of the community. This seems to suggest a need for the

staff of the reading centers which are associated with predominantly black colleges to expand the reading services which they are providing for members of the black community. Financial support for activities of this nature might be sought from the federal government and private foundations.

On the other hand, an examination of the voluntary activities engaged in by the college reading specialists indicated that efforts were being made by some of them to lend their support and know-how to various community groups and agencies who are providing various kinds of service to the community.

Some of the voluntary activities included working with: (1) Vista tutoring programs, (2) pre-school programs sponsored by Model Cities and day care centers, (3) adult education programs sponsored by churches, and (4) students from local schools.

SERVING AS CONSULTANTS TO PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER LEARNING

The changes which have occured in public education during the past decade have been rather dramatic to say the least. Silberman (6) writes: "In most large cities and a good many smaller ones, for example, the public schools are in disarray, torn apart by conflicts over integration, desegregation, decentralization, and community control." In northern urban areas, there has been a tremendous shift in the school population resulting from the migration of masses of people from the South hoping to improve their economic status in life, and an exodus of middle-class whites to the suburbs. There have also been shifts in the school population of many southern school districts brought about by efforts to desegregate the schools. In both instances, the changes

which have taken place have produced problems which can only be solved by people who are totally committed to the prospect that every child must be educated to the limits of his potential.

Many of the administrators who are charged with the responsibility for the over-all operation of these schools place a high priority on the development of a viable reading program. It is in this area that the black reading specialist can be most helpful, not only in terms of the expertise which he has in reading in general, but also in terms of the sensitivity which he can bring to a situation of this kind. He may bring special insights into the reading problems associated with disadvantaged children. In addition, it may help disadvantaged students to develop positive self images to be brought into contact with members of their own ethnic background who are playing leadership roles.

Some years ago, in a White House Conference on Education, former Vice President Humphrey emphasized the need for colleges "in or near... decaying urban neighborhoods (to seek) cooperative agreements with local school systems in these areas. Let them quit playing games and get into the battle." The ensuing years have witnessed many attempts by colleges to meet this challenge. The programs which these colleges have initiated have run the gamut from helping local school systems solve the problems which they face to making undergraduate and professional schools more accessible to disadvantaged students.

As far as the staffing of these programs is concerned, the services of a reading specialist is very often indispensable. For example, two

years ago the writer was approached by the Director of the Eastern Legal Education Opportunity Program, located at Temple University Law School, to become a staff member of the Summer Institute for the purpose of designing and executing a program in reading for the participants who were largely disadvantaged students seeking to gain admission to law school. Opportunities of this nature provide a real challenge and a responsibility which should be met by black reading specialists. Whenever possible, the black reading specialist should serve in the capacity of a staff member or consultant to programs of this kind because of the unique contribution he can make to the success of ventures of this type.

SUMMARY

In conclusion, the writer has attempted to indicate what he thinks should be the major role and responsibility of the black reading specialist. It has been suggested that attempting to ascribe a unique role to the black reading specialist is fraught with difficulties since it could be argued, rather convincingly, that the role of the black reading specialist should not differ significantly from the role of the typical reading specialist. Nevertheless, the writer takes the position that the black reading specialist has the following major responsibilities: (1) becoming more involved in the activities and functions of the major reading organizations, (2) contributing to research efforts to discover better ways of teaching disadvantaged children to read, (3) recruiting and training potential black reading specialists, (4) working with community groups and

agencies, and (5) serving as consultants to local school districts and institutions of higher learning.

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